

# Prisoners learn poise courtesy of Dale Carnegie

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## Inmates get self-help via Dale Carnegie

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ANGOLA, La. - It was an ordinary childhood practice turned into a special middle-aged memory — early mornings in the kitchen with his mother, sharing the rich coffee and chicory blend so beloved in Louisiana.

His mother died while he was in Louisiana State Penitentiary, but their morning ritual evoked a story that he tearfully shared with a group of fellow prisoners as a student of the Dale Carnegie self-improvement course.



Inmates Mark Burge, left, Peter Mule, center, and Joe Greco gather Aug. 5 to discuss the Dale Carnegie course offered at the Louisiana State Penitentiary.

Angola, as the massive, maximum-security prison farm is known, is the last stop in life for most of the 8,100 men who make it their home. For 50 years, the course has been offering prisoners the tools to resolve disputes, and in the process teaching them speaking skills and training them to be self-confident.

As a result, hundreds of hardened criminals have found an outlet for their emotions, and a vision of hope, by learning to communicate effectively. For 94 years, the course has taught business professionals outside these walls and across the nation how to win friends and influence people.

"It's really amazing," said inmate Joe Greco. "I've seen men stand at that podium shaking, really shaking with fear. And I've watched them go on to be skilled speakers, very confident and in charge."

Greco, serving a life sentence for murder, agrees with what a friend told him — public speaking is enough to make anyone's knees knock.

"My friend said, 'I've held up liquor stores, convenience stores, all kind of places,'" Greco said, "'but I never knew real fear until I stood in front of a group of people and tried to make a speech.'"

### **Goal to express without threats**

The course is designed to build communication skills and strengths on all levels.

"If I work with you in a safe environment, and build your strengths, even if you never speak in public, you are going to be much better in all types of ... situations," said James Winner, chairman of the Dale Carnegie program in Louisiana. "If you can clearly and non-threateningly express yourself, you can eliminate many problems. I would think that is even more true in a prison situation."

The course at Angola is offered through a club, not an official Dale Carnegie chapter. The club was founded in 1958 and is one of 32 clubs at the prison, ranging from drama to arts and crafts.

The prison pays nothing to Carnegie — inmates study from old books and a series of photocopied worksheets that have been handed down over the years. Two of the books date back to the founding of the club and some paperbacks are at least a decade old. There is no charge to the prisoners taking the course.

Burl Cain, who became the warden at Angola in January 1995, took over the largest prison in the country and the bloodiest prison in the nation. In 1951, in an effort to protest brutal conditions at the prison about 115 miles northwest of New Orleans, 31 inmates sliced their Achilles tendons so they couldn't be sent to work.

As recently as the mid-1970s, gangs were common, new inmates were routinely threatened and some prisoners slept with knives beneath their pillows. At least 40 inmates were killed between 1972 and 1975.

### **Calm and belonging**

Cain said the clubs have helped bring a sense of calm to the prison. Since Cain has been warden, only six violent deaths were recorded, said prison spokeswoman Cathy Fontenot.

"People want to belong to something," Cain said. "We have clubs for them to belong to and we don't have gangs here. It gives them something to think about, something to do, something to look forward to."

Dale Carnegie courses are taught in every state and more than 75 countries. The company's Web site says more than 7 million people have completed the training, including several hundred at Angola.

Angola, a working farm covering 18,000 acres, is bordered by the Mississippi River on three sides and the rugged Tunica Hills on the other. More than 90 percent of its prisoners will die here. Because all life sentences in Louisiana come without the possibility of parole, only a governor's pardon can precipitate a release.

When Peter Mule arrived at Angola in 1970, people were still getting out. Mule, 68, who is 38 years into a life sentence for murder, still clings to the hope for freedom. He says the famous course in self-improvement, salesmanship, corporate training, public speaking and interpersonal skills is something that may one day help him make a difference.

"It teaches you how to avoid confrontation," he said. "It shows you how to listen to the other guy, and how to present your side. I think if I ever got a chance to speak for myself to a politician, to somebody with a way to help me, I could do it effectively."

Mark Burge, 49, his heavily tattooed arms partially covered in a T-shirt designed specifically for the Angola Carnegie club, has been in prison 32 years for aggravated kidnapping. He's been a Carnegie club member for 25 years, and the club president for two. He also teaches the 10-week Carnegie course.

"We tell them to speak on their own lives, that's what they know," Burge said. "A lot of (the speeches) are about prison life, many are about families, especially if they have children."

The inmate who recalled those mornings in his mother's kitchen was new to public speaking but in his two-minute speech was able to share a vulnerable part of himself. He said he looked forward to the day when he would drink coffee with his mom again, in heaven.